IGNORING THE FIRST DRAFT OF HISTORY? Searching for the popular press in studies of twentieth-century Britain

Adrian Bingham

Until recent years, historians of twentieth-century Britain have made relatively little use of the popular press as a source. This is partly due to the practical problems of working with newspapers (pre-digitisation); there has also been, however, a widespread perception that popular journalism is predictable, trivial and politically and socially conservative, and therefore not worthy of sustained scholarly attention. These attitudes are starting to change, encouraged by the process of digitisation. Nevertheless, substantial gaps remain in our understanding of the impact of the press. This article is in two sections; the first examines how popular national newspapers have been used in political narratives, and the second explores their place in discussions of social and cultural change. The article argues that not only have entrenched stereotypes prevented historians from properly understanding the nature of popular newspapers, they have also led to them misinterpreting broader developments in British politics, society and culture.

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The 'most important published primary source for the historian', writes John Tosh in his widely used guide to historical methodology, 'is the press' (Tosh 42). The value of the press for studying twentieth-century Britain is particularly evident. Newspapers were one of the most successful products of the period: after the launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896, the habit of daily newspaper readership gradually spread throughout society, so that in the early 1950s some 85% of adults regularly saw a paper. At mid-century, Britons read more newspapers per capita than any other population, and the leading London titles sold more copies than any of their rivals around the world (Hobson, Henry, and Abrams 31–3; Williams 1–2; Tunstall ch. 3). Even if the rise of television weakened the hold of newspapers, overall readership levels declined only gradually by the end of the century, and politicians, policy-makers and social campaigners continued to play close attention to the press.

Despite their political, social and cultural significance, however, newspapers have not, until recently, featured prominently in histories of modern Britain (Vella 205; Mort 'Intellectual Pluralism', 215). Where historians have consulted newspaper archives, moreover, they have tended to focus on titles aimed at the elites—self-styled 'papers of record' such as *The Times* and the (*Manchester*) *Guardian*—rather than their mass-market rivals.[1] There are a number of reasons for the infrequent use of the popular press. Some of them are practical, relating to the relative inaccessibility and the time-consuming nature of working with any newspaper (pre-digitisation, of course); popular titles, moreover, did not produce indexes, and were far less likely to be kept in provincial libraries than *The Times* or the *Guardian*.[2] There has also been, however, a widespread perception that popular newspapers are predictable, trivial, unsophisticated, usually politically and socially conservative and prone to episodes of irrational sensationalism—and therefore rarely

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worthy of sustained scholarly attention. These attitudes are starting to change, and the process of digitisation has encouraged considerable fresh interest in newspapers as a source. Nevertheless, substantial gaps remain in our understanding of the impact of the press. This article will argue that not only have entrenched stereotypes prevented historians from properly understanding the nature of popular newspapers, but they have led to them misinterpreting broader developments in British politics, society and culture.

This article is in two sections; the first examines how popular newspapers have been used as evidence in political narratives, and the second explores their place in discussions of social and cultural change. In both parts, I include some brief examples from my own research that challenge conventional assumptions about newspaper content and impact. Three initial clarifications must be made. First, this article largely focuses on the work of scholars who would see themselves primarily as historians, many of whom would make no claim to be experts on journalism or the media. (Some of my points do apply more broadly, however).[3] Second, for reasons of the space and clarity, this piece will concentrate on the use of popular daily and Sunday national newspapers, rather than local or regional papers, or magazines and other periodicals. There has been in recent years, some rich and stimulating analyses of a wide range of popular publications, particularly women's magazines and campaigning journals, and historians using national newspapers often have much to learn from this wider scholarship.[4] Third, this article is not trying to provide a 'defence' of the popular press. It does not try to disguise the fact that newspapers were (and are) highly formulaic products, designed to make a profit and routinely prioritising entertainment over public service; nor that they have often marginalised radical voices and demonised minorities. It is certainly not difficult to understand why scholars have frequently voiced their disapproval and even contempt for the contents of popular newspapers. This is, rather, a plea for some shades of grey in a scholarly discussion that is too often conducted black and white. Popular newspapers are too important for their role to be assessed on the basis of assumption and stereotype; we need to take them seriously and interrogate them with an open mind.

Political Histories

There is now a considerable body of work by historians exploring the ways newspapers and periodicals shaped the political culture of early modern and modern Britain. Scholars have, for example, examined how newssheets and newsbooks represented the bitter conflicts of the Civil War; demonstrated how radical publications stimulated the political reform movements of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and studied how 'respectable' papers in London and the provinces played a key role in consolidating party identities in the evolving political system (Barker; Jones; Koss; McElligott; Peacey; Raymond; Stedman-Jones; Thompson). Much of this work has been shaped by Jürgen Habermas' contention that newspapers played an important role in the construction of a 'public sphere', and historians have shown how newspapers enabled individuals to participate in public debate and become integrated into party political competition.

For Habermas and many others, however, the 'commercialisation' and 'industrialisation' of the press in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a significant shift in the nature of journalism and the operation of the 'public sphere'. Historians have tended to assume that with the rise of a 'new journalism' from the 1880s, and in particular from the launch of the *Daily Mail* in 1896, the popular press served to distract popular attention away from politics to entertainment, celebrity and consumption, and coarsened and degraded the popular political debate that did occur. 'Depoliticisation' and 'tabloidisation' are the resilient master narratives of the twentieth-century popular press, and they are used to excuse historians from a detailed consideration of contents of newspapers.[5] Mark Garnett and Richard Weight's entry on newspapers in their *A–Z Guide to Modern British History* unapologetically states these negative assumptions when describing the editorial policy of the popular press: 'for every reader it offended with moronic tittle-tattle, it would probably attract two more' (357). Others are less acerbic, but similar in attitude. Lloyd notes that the inter-war *Express* and *Mail* may have 'attracted large readerships, but they were readers who did not take politics seriously enough to worry about the details of a particular issue'; in any case 'the quality of the news and comment provided by the mass circulation press was not high' (140, 176). Writing of the 1980s and 1990s Lloyd adds that '[n]ewspapers were very welcome as entertainment, but even the broadsheet newspapers were not taken too seriously as sources of moral authority' (Lloyd 446). Arthur Marwick agrees that 'It could scarcely be said that newspapers moulded opinion. More and more, they were themselves a part of mass consumer society', offering 'sensational, entertaining and often trivial material rather than hard news and serious comment' (*Britain* 70, 106). Kevin Jefferys briefly considers some evidence about newspaper reading habits before briskly concluding that newspapers 'were read by the majority for entertainment, not for enlightenment' (50). Modern popular newspapers, in short, are often viewed as ephemeral and unimportant publications making little contribution to political life other than providing a superficial and distorted coverage of the issues of the day to a largely apathetic audience.

If the impact of popular newspapers is considered at all, it is almost always held to be conservative or reactionary, and there is a predictable list of occasions when popular newspapers are brought into the basic narratives of twentieth-century British political history. Many accounts highlight the imperialism of the press around the Boer War and its jingoism before, during and after the First World War; the hubristic political interventions of the 'press barons' in the 1920s and 1930s also usually feature, such as the anti-socialist campaigns of the *Mail* and the *Express*, the 'Empire Free Trade' crusade, and Rothermere's support for Mosley's British Union of Fascists. Occasional references to the 1940s *Mirror* or the anti-Europeanism of the post-war *Express* notwithstanding, most narratives then jump to the popular press's support for Thatcherism in the 1980s, describing its virulent attacks on the so-called 'loony left' and the *Sun*'s belligerent coverage of the Falklands conflict.[6] At every stage the emphasis is placed on the aggression and lack of sophistication of the press's rhetoric, and the extent to which newspapers operated as mouthpieces for outspoken right-wing proprietors and editors.

These interpretations are not unpersuasive, and it is difficult to deny either that popular newspapers consistently prioritised entertainment over politics in their content, or that much of their political content was conservative and reductive. But these are very

broad generalisations, and they have too often been merely assumed by historians rather than investigated and demonstrated; we desperately need to add complexity and nuance to this picture. There is room for what Mark Hampton has called a 'post-radical' liberal narrative which empirically explores the ways in which the press did indeed contribute to public discussion ('Renewing' 26). This would be based on the recognition of three key points. First, we should accept that many popular newspapers contained a significant amount of political content, even towards the end of the twentieth century—especially if we adopt an inclusive definition of 'political content' to incorporate a broad range of features and opinion pieces about contemporary society, as well as cartoons and photography. Popular papers may have limited the scope and depth of their parliamentary and party political coverage in comparison with the Victorian Press, but we should not exaggerate the speed and scale of this decline. There is plenty of evidence that popular newspapers often provided more, rather than less, overtly political reporting than the majority of their readers wanted; and while political material may have declined as a proportion of overall editorial content, late-twentieth century newspapers were significantly larger than their Victorian counterparts, so this decline was much smaller in terms of actual space (Tunstall 32). James Thomas's survey of newspaper election coverage found more continuity than change in overall levels of political content since 1945 (*Conclusion*); and while newspapers only focused intermittently on the routine business of politics, their interventions continued to carry weight across the period.

Second, we should not assume that the popular press's political coverage was inevitably crude, predictable and overtly propagandist. Many talented political journalists—William Connor ('Cassandra'), John Junor, Keith Waterhouse, Trevor Kavanagh, Paul Routledge to name a few—have written for popular newspapers, and countless politicians, academics and commentators—including Arnold Bennett, J.B. Priestley, Winston Churchill, Barbara Castle, Richard Crossman and A.J.P. Taylor—have provided regular opinion pieces. While these contributors were instructed to prioritise simplicity, clarity and brightness, this does not mean that their offerings were invariably formulaic and unsophisticated; on the contrary, many were thoughtful, nuanced and challenging. Mark Hampton has demonstrated how popular cartoonists—with David Low being the most notable example—sought to make a serious and nuanced contribution to public debate (Hampton 'Inventing'). David Low—whose cartoons in the *Evening Standard* frequently argued against the opinions of its proprietor, Lord Beaverbrook—also shows that most papers offered some opportunities to dissent from the editorial line. James Thomas reminds us that for much of the century, the style of popular political reporting was such that the words and speeches of political opponents were still routinely reported, even during election campaigns: in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the *Mail* and the *Express*, gave relatively balanced coverage of the party manifestos released for general elections (Thomas ch. 2). During the 1918 election, indeed, Northcliffe went further and offered the labour movement a daily column in the *Mail* (Beers *Your Britain* 38–40). Nor were popular papers as predictable as is sometimes suggested: from the 1920s, for example, Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* consistently campaigned for high wages for workers, while Rupert Murdoch's *Sun* was originally supportive of the European Community. If popular political journalism was often mechanical, one-dimensional and deliberately sensational, it also had the capacity to stimulate and surprise.

Third, it is important to appreciate that even if many readers bought their newspapers for human interest and entertainment rather than political news, and were rather casual in their reading of the political columns, it certainly does not follow that they did not absorb any political messages. After all, popular journalism, with its big headlines and direct language, was designed to reach those whose attention and interest was often limited. The techniques of personalisation and sensationalism made politics more accessible to readers often alienated by traditional forms of political discourse (MacDonald; Temple ch. 10). Newspapers on their own could not necessarily convert a sceptical public of the merits of a political position, and many high-profile campaigns fell flat, but they were often very successful in shaping the political agenda, and in influencing the ways in which readers thought about a variety of underlying political and social issues—from immigration to the welfare state. Nor should we forget the ideological significance of apparently non-political newspaper content: the coverage of consumption, celebrity and sport helped to shape the ways readers interpreted the world around them (Curran, Douglas, and Whannel). As Frank Mort has observed, popular newspapers exert 'enormous impact' on 'mass politics as a component of everyday life', and historians need to do far more to analyse and understand this impact ('Intellectual Pluralism' 215).

Indeed, my own research suggests that popular newspapers played an important role in integrating previously unenfranchised voters into the political system in the years after 1918 as Britain finally became a full democracy. Although several popular papers—including the *Mail* and the *Mirror*—had been opposed to the enfranchisement of women before the First World War, by the time the vote was conceded there was a conspicuous desire in Fleet Street to rally behind the decision, and the full spectrum of the national press worked hard to encourage eligible women to vote in the General Election of December 1918.[7] On polling day, for example, the *Express* carried a front-page message to women from Millicent Fawcett, the veteran leader of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS), calling on women to make use of their new power: 'Remember you are voting for your work, your wages, the education of your children, the guardianship laws that concern them, for your homes, for your citizenship. And then do not hesitate, but Go To The Poll!' ('An Appeal to Women') Other papers were similarly insistent. 'Vote! Vote!! Vote!!!' implored the women's page of the *Mail*: 'Women Must Do Their Duty Today as Parliamentary Voters' ('Vote! Vote!! Vote!!!'). The *Daily News* explained that it was the responsibility of women 'to promote the welfare of the community as they see it after due consideration and reflection', while the *Mirror* commissioned an article explaining the 'dangers involved in apathy on the part of the feminine electorate' ('How Women Should Vote'; 'If British Women Fail To Vote?'). The *Mail*'s women's page published a message from the NUWSS that sought to address women's uncertainties about entering the previously male sphere of political debate:

> You feel, perhaps, that politics are something remote, something not women's concern at all. And yet there is no one more concerned than the British woman with the politics of today. For this is what the politics of today mean - the terms on which women shall be allowed to work, the trades in which they shall work, the wages they shall earn, the education that shall be given to their children . . . ('An Opportunity That Must Not Be Lost')

Indeed, up to a third of the 1918 general election coverage in some papers was devoted to 'women's issues' and female candidates (Bingham *Gender* 120–27). If much of this material was saturated by gender stereotypes—with endless references to 'prudent housewives' and 'compassionate mothers'—there was a genuine attempt to reshape political discourse to include women. Historians have studied in some detail how the party machines attempted to appeal to the new female voters in their propaganda, without fully recognising how popular newspapers were reaching much larger audiences with similar material.[8] And if the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Mirror* were famously hostile to lowering the voting age for women to 21—both papers campaigned vociferously against what they described as the 'Flapper Vote Folly'—this was, as I have argued elsewhere, a reflection of the rabid anti-socialism of Lord Rothermere rather than the product of the popular press's anti-feminism; Rothermere assumed that young working women would disproportionately vote Labour (Bingham 'Flapper Vote'). Other popular papers, including the *Express* and the *Daily Herald*, welcomed the measure and, as in 1918, once the enfranchisement had been passed, newspapers turned to the task of winning over the new voters. The popular press, in short, was an important and accessible channel of political information for women often marginalised by existing party and constituency structures.

Similarly, the *Daily Herald* and the *Daily Mirror* did much to bring politics to the working classes in the 1930s: the *Herald* to the unionised, the *Mirror*, initially at least, to the non-unionised. The *Daily Mirror's* reinvention in the mid-1930s as a populist tabloid entailed reducing its proportion of political content still further from an already low level, a pragmatic decision designed to make the article appealing to a new constituency (Bingham 'Representing'; Bingham and Conboy). Many of the households the *Mirror* were targeting had never taken a national daily paper, and were poorly integrated into national political culture; a significant proportion understandably viewed politics as an elite activity conducted by 'them' rather than 'us'. Many working-class families had a taboo on talking politics at home, and most forms of sociability excluded overtly political debate; party political allegiances tended to be lukewarm, and in some areas even belonging to a political party was deemed unrespectable (Jefferys ch. 2; McKibbin 202–5). The social research organisation Political and Economic Planning may have been critical of the triviality of popular newspapers in its *Report on the British Press* of 1938, but it admitted that:

> even the more trivial newspapers compare favourably in many respects with much of the reading matter which they have in fact replaced. So far from the public taste having fallen from a once high level, there is good reason to suppose that it was even lower in the past, although the rise of mass-circulation newspapers has made its shortcomings much more generally conspicuous. (Political and Economic Planning 31)

Even if the *Mirror* only brought a limited amount of overtly political content to working-class homes, it may still have been more than many readers had previously consumed. This content was, moreover, treated seriously. Pragmatically restricting the reporting of party politics was not incompatible with strong political views or even idealism: key figures at the paper, such as Hugh Cudlipp and William Connor, combined commercial realism with a desire to contribute to the political education of readers and further the cause of political and social reform. During the late 1930s, the article produced thoughtful and powerfully argued editorials and features criticising the economic policies of the National

Government, opposing Chamberlain's appeasement strategy, and lamenting the rigidities of class in Britain (Bingham 'Representing'). These left-of-centre political positions contributed to the spectacular commercial success of the paper before, during and after the Second World War.

The *Mirror* is particularly significant in that it demonstrates that the popular press did more than buttress the political and economic status quo. The *Mirror* has received plenty of attention from scholars working in media studies, journalism and cultural studies, but far less from historians. As Martin Pugh has recently observed, 'historians of the Labour Party have had little to say about the role of the *Daily Mirror*' in the political culture of the left; they have tended to hold a 'dismissive view of the political significance of the newspaper' (Pugh *Daily Mirror* 421). Pugh himself has written persuasively about the way in which the paper may have encouraged the non-unionised working classes to shift towards Labour in the 1940s; there is potential for far more work on the role of the *Mirror* in building and sustaining support for the post-war settlement between the 1940s and 1960s (Pugh *Daily Mirror*; *Speak for Britain*). The historian Laura Beers has recently argued that the Labour Party used the media more successfully in the first half of the century than is often assumed; her work suggests that far more attention should also be paid to the role of the *Daily Herald* in communicating Labour's message to a national audience ('Education or Manipulation'; *Your Britain*). The *Herald* was, after all, the first newspaper to break the two million copies a day circulation barrier, and was influential throughout the 1930s and 1940s; its later decline and disappearance should not be allowed to detract from its earlier achievements (Beers *Your Britain*; Richards).

Historians, in short, need to take far more seriously the popular press's role in sustaining a left-of-centre politics, especially in the middle decades of the century. James Curran recently pointed out that the central defect of the 'radical' narrative of media history is 'its failure to acknowledge that the reformist heirs of the early working-class movement succeeded in the twentieth century in significantly modifying the social system', and he has called for a 'reformist' narrative of media development which explores, amongst other things, the construction of the welfare state and the media's involvement in 'progressive change' (Curran 11, 18–19). The popular press should form an important strand in this 'reformist' narrative; the huge amount of publicity the press gave to the Beveridge Report, to take just one example, was very important in consolidating a clear idea of post-war reconstruction in the public's mind in the early 1940s. Historians could play a major role in constructing such a narrative if they jettison some of their assumptions about depoliticisation and conservatism.

Social and Cultural Histories

In the wake of the 'cultural turn' and the increased scholarly preoccupation with language and meaning, a number of historians have used popular newspapers to explore social relationships and identity construction. The bulk of this work has focused on court and crime reporting and the press's role as a public moraliser; as Lucy Bland has noted, popular newspapers transformed criminal trials into 'mass cultural spectacles' in which the 'boundaries of morality and normality were defined and redefined' (Bland 626, 628). Judith Walkowitz's *City of Dreadful Delight*, which discussed both W.T. Stead's investigation into

child prostitution, published in 1885 as 'The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon', and the coverage of the brutal 'Jack the Ripper' murders at the end of that decade, offered an influential example of how new cultural history approaches could be used to analyse and decode newspaper reporting (Walkowitz). In recent years, there have been several notable studies of the press coverage of high-profile trials, particularly involving individuals who transgressed accepted boundaries of gender and sexuality.[9] These studies have made a significant contribution to our knowledge of popular cultural debates about law and order, sexual 'deviance', and gender roles.

Court and crime reporting have provided a rich seam of evidence for historians to mine; but one unintended consequence of the concentration on this aspect of popular journalism has been an over-emphasis on the press as a conservative and unforgiving arbiter of morality and respectability. In broader social and cultural histories of twentieth-century Britain, this is particularly evident; the main role of the popular press seems to be to whip up moral panics about deviant behaviour or to identify and attack threats to social and cultural status quo. In histories of women and gender in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, press hostility to the 'flapper' is a recurring theme; it is claimed that attacking single women and championing domesticity was part of a concerted effort by newspapers to reassert 'traditional' gender boundaries after the 'blurring' experienced during the First World War (Higonnet et al. Introduction; Kent ch. 5–6). 'From the beginning of 1919 the contemporary young woman was criticised on every conceivable ground', writes the historian Billie Melman; in this 'welter of misogyny', she continues, there was frequently an 'extraordinarily aggressive tone of utterance' (17–18).[10] In histories of the post-1945 period, the popular press can be found 'amplifying' anxieties about crime by describing, defining and exaggerating the activities of teddy boys, mods and rockers and muggers; criticising and caricaturing counter-cultural groups and social movements such as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), anti-Vietnam protests and second-wave feminism; demonising 'scroungers' and immigrants; and warning of the dangers posed by sexually explicit or violent material in films, videos and on the Internet.[11] Historians of sexuality have focused on the ways in which the press demonised homosexuals and paedophiles, and objectified women through a deeply entrenched pin-up culture, while at the same time stirring up concern about the explicitness of sex education in schools.[12] Patrick Higgins argues that through the press an 'incredible amount of poison was released into British society, with some terrible cultural consequences' (282); Richard Davenport-Hines writes scathingly of the 'salacity and cruelty of the British gutter press' (181). In almost every case the press is presented as a reactionary and irrational force, simplifying and distorting, prone to 'sensation' and 'hysteria', with competition between papers and between media forcing journalists into ever greater excesses.

We should not, of course, ignore, minimise or excuse the undoubted viciousness of the popular press in these instances; popular newspapers have repeatedly misrepresented and pilloried minorities, the socially marginal and oppositional groups, and this rightly stirs up scholarly anger. At times, though, there seems to be an almost wilful desire on the part of historians to ignore any sign of originality, complexity or progressive thought in popular newspapers. And by making generalisations about the press based on selective quotation and assumption rather than detailed research, historians have not only misrepresented the nature of popular journalism, they have misread the social and cultural climate. As I have

argued at length elsewhere, for example, the inter-war popular press did not consistently demonise 'flappers', but generally embraced the new opportunities and freedoms for women. Not only was political coverage reshaped to include and engage female voters, as noted above, but pioneers in the fields of employment, sport and aviation were celebrated, and there was considerable support for the relaxation of restrictive dress codes and social conventions (Bingham *Gender*). The re-evaluation of femininity was certainly kept within strict limits, and women's appearance was placed under increased scrutiny, but newspapers encouraged readers to come to terms with modern social relations rather than reassert traditional boundaries; reading these papers helps us to understand that contemporaries saw these decades not as an 'era of domesticity'—as many historians have argued[13]—but as an important period of change and 'modernity' in gender relations.

My research also suggests that during and after the Second World War, popular newspapers played an important part in opening up the public discussion of sex. Sex-related reporting became far more wide-ranging, extensive and detailed. In 1942–1943, the *Daily Mirror* challenged the press's traditional reticence about venereal disease by providing readers with explicit guidance from a medical professional: this was the first time that a modern mass-market newspaper had undertaken an overtly educational role on sexual issues (Bingham 'Venereal Disease'). In 1949, the *Sunday Pictorial* commissioned Mass-Observation to carry out the 'first national random sample survey of sex' to be undertaken in Britain; the result was an explicit five-part serial whose evidence has been widely used by historians to explore the sexual mores of the period (Stanley 3–4; Bingham 'K-Bomb'). During the 1950s, the popular press pushed back the boundaries of acceptable discussion and found new ways of writing about sex. Old patterns of euphemism and evasion did not disappear entirely, of course, but coverage of sexual issues became significantly more direct and explicit, and journalists became far more accustomed to using the languages of sexology, social science and psychology. Professor Alfred Kinsey's sex surveys were heavily reported, and discussions about abortion, contraception, prostitution and homosexuality become far more prominent (Bingham *Family Newspapers*). The popular journalism of the 1950s, in short, helped to prepare the way for the much broader sexualisation of the media in the 1960s, and made a significant contribution to the climate of reform that produced liberalising legislation during Wilson's Labour government.

Yet, because historians have either ignored the popular press completely or assumed that its content was conservative or crassly commercial, the press has not been properly integrated into the narratives of permissiveness and social change relating to the 1950s and 1960s. These narratives remain preoccupied with particular cultural forms that are perceived as having critical potential: theatre (the 'Angry Young Men'), cinema (the British 'new wave'), fiction (the trial and publication of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1960) and broadcasting (the changes ushered in at the BBC by Hugh Carleton-Greene).[14] In such narratives the press is almost entirely absent. The only event in Fleet Street that is typically mentioned is Rupert Murdoch's relaunch of the *Sun* in 1969, and the introduction the following year of the 'Page Three girl'; this is usually in the context of noting a turning point in the 'tabloidization' (or decline) of popular journalism. Indeed, in the three main historical collections exploring the culture of the 1960s, there is not a single chapter about the national press (Moore-Gilbert and Seed; Aldgate, Chapman, and Marwick; Collins). If we

are to properly understand the nature of 'permissiveness', we will need to understand the ways in which popular newspapers prepared the way for, and contributed to, the shifts in writing about and representing sexuality.

The ongoing process of digitising newspapers and periodicals raises the prospect that in the future historians will examine press content far more extensively and with greater sophistication. The rapid evolution of digital databases and search techniques—Gale Cengage's recently released Newsvault, for example, allows over 10 million pages of content across a variety of different titles and periods to be searched simultaneously—will enable far more ambitious studies of popular journalism.[15] Indeed, there is already a younger generation of researchers coming into the profession who take for granted the easy access to newspapers and regard them as a rich and valuable source. Several ongoing or recently completed research projects around the country have made significant use of the popular press, and a wide range of different themes and events have been explored, including fatherhood in the mid-twentieth century, immigration after the Second World War, the death of Marilyn Monroe, and food and health campaigning from the 1970s to the 1990s.[16] This generation of researchers will surely find that popular newspapers were more complex, diverse and unpredictable than many critics have admitted. They were not invariably reactionary and negative, but could be progressive and generous; they did not merely pander to majority opinion, but sometimes provided a powerful voice for it against vested interests; they undermined stereotypes as well as consolidated them, and provided a platform to a wide range of contributors and causes. Popular newspapers may not provide the first draft of history, but their centrality to British society and culture in the twentieth century is such that historians cannot afford to ignore them.

Notes

1. Franklin Gannon, for example, examining the British press's coverage of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, had little interest in the reporting found in the popular papers owned by the so-called 'press barons', Lord Beaverbrook's *Daily Express* and Lord Rothermere's *Daily Mail*. Assuming these papers were simply mouthpieces for their owners he argued that it 'would be ludicrous to devote as much space or attention to Lord Beaverbrook's or Lord Rothermere's few unsophisticated and obsessive ideas as to the development of important ideas and attitudes in the columns and offices of the quality newspapers' (Gannon vii).
2. For more on the practical issues, see Bingham, Digitization.
3. Julian Petley, professor of film and television, argues, for example, that:

   > 'Most newspapers were, and remained, decidedly right wing, but even when they were not lending their support explicitly to the Conservatives, they radiated an illiberal, authoritarian-populist world view that blatantly appealed to popular prejudices and folk wisdom and was resolutely hostile to progressive opinion of all kinds. Jingoism, xenophobia and an increasingly shrill nationalism were crucial ingredients of this unappetising ideological brew. (Petley 190).

4. See, for example, Tinkler; Mort *Cultures of Consumption*, esp. Part 1; Reed; Tusan.
5. Examples of some (otherwise excellent) general histories in which newspapers are almost entirely absent include Harris, Ward and Addison. Others, such as Robbins and Morgan,

pass over the press in a couple of paragraph. Weight has a sprinkling of quotations from popular newspapers, but there is no sustained consideration of the press, unlike television, cinema and music. Some of the best specialised studies of political culture also fail to consider the role of the press in any detail: Black, for example.

6. Stevenson mentions the press's 'popular chauvinism' before the First World War, its war reporting and its inter-war hostility to scroungers. He notes that 'newspapers were, in the main, less radical commentaries on society than reflections of it', and that 'serious discussion' could be found in 'journals and outlets' other than the *Mail*, *Mirror* and *Express* (Stevenson 406). Clarke mentions the role of the press during the First World War, the Empire Free trade campaign and the press's support for Thatcher. Garnett and Weight mention the Empire Free Trade campaign, the *Mail*'s support for the Blackshirts and the Sun's support for the Conservatives (357–61). Benson writes about the conservatism of the press and its attacks on Labour and the Liberals (119).
7. On the press and the franchise question, see Pugh *March of the Women*, ch. 9. For more on the appeal to female voters after 1918, see Bingham *Gender*, ch. 4.
8. David Jarvis, for example, has examined the rhetoric of Conservative Party magazines and pamphlets aimed at women in the 1920s: there are striking similarities between the material contained in these publications and in the pages of the *Mail*, the *Express* and the *Mirror* (Jarvis 'Mrs Maggs').
9. There has, for example, been work on gender-crossing (McLaren; Vernon; Oram), divorce (Savage), homosexual offences (Higgins, Waters, and Houlbrook), and murders involving women (Bland, Wood, Mort *Capital Affairs* ch. 3).
10. Deirdre Beddoe argues that:

> [i]n the inter-war years only one desirable image was held up to women by all the mainstream media agencies—that of housewife and mother. This single role model was presented to women to follow and all other alternatives were presented as wholly undesirable. Realising this central fact is the key to understanding every other aspect of women's lives in Britain in the 1920s and 1930s. (8)

Dale Spender has claimed that 'the established and male-controlled press worked to censor the demands and activities of women' (4). Cheryl Law notes that 'newspapers were full of articles establishing marriage as the pinnacle of fulfilment for women and thereby alternately ridiculing or patronising the single woman' (205). Sue Bruley agrees that single women were 'vilified' as 'useless members of society' (62).

11. Garnett and Weight suggest that:

> tabloids fed off the general post-war British neurosis . . .. Popular hatred was still exploited for profit . . . but fear was now the predominant emotion. Asylum seekers and paedophiles were the most alluring targets at the end of the century, but the crime figures were a reliable stand-by and the decline in confidence in public servants, like teachers and doctors, provided a steady stream of flesh-creeping copy. (360–61)

12. On the portrayal of homosexuality, see, for example, Jeffery-Poulter, Higgins, and Waters. On sex education see Hampshire and Lewis.

13. This is, for example, how the period 1918–1940 is labelled in Martin Pugh's widely used textbook (*State and Society* ch. 13).
14. For example, Sutherland; Aldgate; Marwick *Sixties*; Green; Donnelly.
15. Gale Cengage's Newsvault is available at http://gale.cengage.co.uk/product-highlights/general-reference/gale-historical-newspapers/gale-newsvault.aspx
16. On fatherhood, see King; on immigration, see Young; on Monroe, see Yorston; on food and health campaigning, see Whitehead.

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Adrian Bingham, Department of History, University of Sheffield, Jessop West, 1 Upper Hanover Street, Sheffield S3 7RA, UK. Tel: +44 (0)114 222 2582; Fax: +44 (0)114 222 2576; Email: adrian.bingham@sheffield.ac.uk